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How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture

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How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture

BY JENNIFER JENSEN WALLACH. LANHAM: ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC., 2013. 241 PP.
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In this book, food and social historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach offers an overview of the complex culinary history of the United States. This is no small task, as the author reminds us, for the U.S. has not developed a “singular cohesive culinary tradition” (xiii). Instead, this nation’s food history has been shaped by regionalism and a strong multicultural character marked by waves of immigration and industrialization.

In her introduction, Wallach summarizes previous writings on the study of U.S. food history, from the colonial period to the present. She encourages scholars and students to examine research on food consumption in the U.S., particularly how it touches upon issues of race, class, and gender.

She cites the seminal work of food critic John L. Hess and food historian Karen Hess in *The Taste of America* (1972), stating that: “good food in America is little more than a memory, and a hope” (xi), and she makes reference to more recent studies, such as Hasia Diner’s *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (2002), and Psyche Williams-Forsen’s *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (2006),¹ books that demonstrate a synthesis of the history of food and cooking in the U.S. Such books address “how Americans have filled their stomachs as a nonverbal way of articulating ideas about what it means to be an American or outsider” (xi).

Wallach chronicles the ways people in the U.S. “have cooked and consumed, fasted and gorged, and accepted and rejected certain foods as a way to tell a story about their identities” (xiii).

Her narrative is divided into eight chapters, beginning with “The Cuisine of Contact,” to explore the ways in which early colonists adapted Native American food ingredients and traditions to English cooking. Wallach takes us on a culinary journey through slavery and American expansion, accompanied by European immigration. Chapters pursue the role of technology, gender, religion and patriotism in the shaping of the “American” diet. In an especially interesting section, she mentions the

establishment of “Home Economics” as a discipline in U.S. schools, highlighting the work of Melusina Fay Pierce (1836-1923), an early American feminist who fostered the “cooperative housekeeping movement” which sought economical compensation for cooking and housework. According to Wallach, “Pierce viewed the changes that had been made to women’s daily working lives with dismay, believing that in the past women had served more important economic roles in the household as producers of a variety of goods, while in the modern [early 20th century] era, they were now merely customers of a burgeoning marketplace controlled by men.” (113). Pierce’s work espoused a radical education of home economics for women, and mandated pay for housework.

Wallach’s final chapter, titled “The Politics of Food,” makes connections between food history and what she calls “racial thinking” (169). In an earlier chapter, “Food Habits and Racial Thinking,” she focuses on the appropriation of Mexican products and cooking practices and the historical impact it has had on U.S. cuisine (178-195). This chapter will be particularly enlightening for those unaware of how Mexican food was popularized in the U.S. and how it has been altered to suit American tastes.

This reviewer found Wallach’s main and opening arguments to be particularly strong and fascinating, including her argument that in general Americans are more likely to consume U.S.-style “Mexican food” than to acknowledge the Mexican-American people for their “American” history. She points out that the relationship Americans have had with Mexican food has been a constant cycle of both rejection and appropriation. Her succinct historical narrative in this section is rooted in the beliefs of the Progressive Era, when a movement or tendency began to portray Mexican people and their cuisine in a negative light.

An attempt to “Americanize” and assimilate regional dietary practices, and the creation of “homemaking” classes by Pearl Ellis, produced what Wallach refers to as a sense of “mainstream” American food, where racial descriptors would be decreased, and to dispel a faulty premise (from

early 19th century construction) that Mexican food had no nutritional value, that it caused children to do poorly in school, and adults to lead lives of crime. Erroneous ideas about diet were one more piece of a larger picture of expansionist prejudice against skin color, and the use of languages other than English.

In this brief final chapter, Wallach provides the reader with an overview of Mexican food in the U.S. Her discussion includes the origins and development of *Tex-Mex*, a fusion of northern Mexican cuisine and regional practicality, as well as a modification of the already hybridized “Mexican food” practice, which originates in (and mixes) both indigenous and European ingredients and practices. Dishes can include *chili con carne* and its variations, *fajitas* and other grilled meats. New Mexico cuisine is another form of this history, dating to the Spanish colonial era. Much more research is needed on the history of Mexican food in the U.S.: in addition to *Tex-Mex*, other regional variations abound.

“The Politics of Food” also deals with a summary of critiques on agribusiness, issues of hunger, and the rise of what Wallach calls “food as entertainment.” she reviews the recent history of the TNT Food Network, the rise of “foodies,” celebrity chefs, and cooking shows, and she visits restaurants throughout the U.S. In this chapter, Wallach also discusses the role that environmentalists, animal rights supporters, and health advocates have played in political discussions of U.S. food and dietary practices. Her conclusion states that choices about food and cooking can be used not only to demonstrate political identification, but also specific elements of patriotism, race, gender, and ethnicity, pointing to the evidence of a rise in ethnic cuisine in the U.S.

This history of food in the U.S., from the early colonial era to the present, is based on both primary and secondary sources. The introduction to the development of foods and foodways in the U.S. will greatly inform readers, and the book provides students of American History and American Studies with important culinary contexts for a broader historical understanding of U.S. history and culture. This book is an important contribution to a still nascent body of scholarly literature on U.S. food history, and complements more recent texts.²

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ John L. Hess and Karen Hess, *A Taste of America*. Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 2000 (with new Introduction by authors); Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*. Boston: Harvard UP, 2003; and Psyche A. Williams-Forsen's *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006.
- ² See Harvey Levenstein. *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003; and Donna R. Gabaccia, *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Boston: Harvard UP, 2000.